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"BECAUSE CULTURE IS A CONVERSATION"

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The poems I would like to explore belong to Boston's **Mary Walker Graham**. Many of Graham's poems adopt the tonal posture that the protagonist is either a violated victim, or is caught in the throes of self-castigation; veer, also, towards the straight Confessional, but always with an added dimension and depth (imaginative capacity) which places her (to my eyes) squarely within the confines of post-avant. The textual edge being coasted along explores the idea that women in poetry should develop the right to plumb the depths of sexuality all the way through, thus fulfilling the archetypal promise of the Creatrix. This, against the confines of the avant-garde— specifically, post-modernity, multi-culturalism, and academic feminism— which tend to cramp expressions of sex and sexuality, and establish chaste sexual models. The following is a prose poem, entitled *A Pit, A Broken Jaw, A Fever*:

When I say pit, I'm thinking of a peach's. As in James and the Giant, as in: the night has many things for a girl to imagine. The way the flesh of the peach can never be extricated, but clings— the fingers follow the juice. The tongue proceeds along the groove. Dark peach: become a night cavern— an ocean's inside us— a balloon for traveling over. When I said galleons of strong arms without heads, I meant natives, ancient. I meant it takes me a long time to get past the hands of men; I can barely get to their elbows. How a twin bed can become an anchor. How a balloon floating up the stairwell can become a person. Across the sea of the hallway then, I floated. I hung to the fluorescent fixtures in the bathroom, I saw a decapitated head on the toilet. I'll do anything to keep from going in there. I only find the magazines under the mattress, the Vaseline in the headboard cabinet. A thought so hot you can't touch it. A pit. A broken jaw. A fever.

This poem oozes creepiness. Among the aspects I find most notable: the way that Graham's protagonist self-infantilizes (regarding herself not as a woman but as a "girl"), the imagery that conflates the sexual with the horrific (Vaseline butting against a decapitated head, broken jaws, fevers), and the intimation that what is at the heart of this confrontation is some sort of compulsive relationship. Yet the poem is intriguing because, despite its intimations, it never abandons the first-person singular. Whomever the "you" happens to be, we never see them, they are never addressed, and the poem posits no "Other." There is solipsism at work, which cuts the

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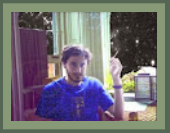

Adam Fieled

Adam Fieled is a writer, theorist, and musician. His books include "Posit" (Dusie Press, 2007), "Beams" (Blazevox, 2007), "Chimes" (Blazevox, 2009-2023), "Apparition Poems" (Blazevox, 2010), "Cheltenham" (Blazevox, 2012), and "Equations" (Blue & Yellow Dog Press, 2011-2023), and "The Posit Trilogy" (Argotist Online E-Books, 2017, includes Posit, 2nd edition). The second edition of "The White Album" (Ungovernable Press, 2009) was released by Eratio Editions in 2018. His latest books are "The Great Recession" (Argotist Online E-Books, 2019), and the fourth installment of Posit, "Volo: A Chapbook" (Funtime Press, 2023). He is the founder of the Philly Free School, a magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, and holds an MFA from New England College and an MA from Temple

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implied "you" down to size; the narrator may be involved in an unhealthy relationship, but the primary feeling we get is one of self-loathing and self-disgust, expressed with compelling (and disturbing) intensity. The generalized phrases, addressed to men, serve to illustrate, as is Graham's wont, the narrator's alienation from whatever specific man is sewn into the situation, interior and exterior. All move forward from a sense of entitlement-in-text to enact scenes from the depths of the female sexual interior.

Indeed: everything about the subject's relationship, both to coitus and to responses to coitus, is posited along axis structures of attraction and repulsion, a push-pull edge that narrativizes how the subject experiences passion. That the affect emanation is dark and dour also creates an axis of attraction and repulsion for the reader, who may choose to engage or disengage, based on temperament, and the principle of fascination, sexual and/or textual, being stimulated or not. Form vacillates between poetry and prose, strictures and freedom, uneasily.

There is also an unlikely quality to Graham's metaphors: what exactly could "balloon" imply, in this context? How can it be connected to the "peach" that Graham puts it up against? At one point, Graham creates a metaphoric chain, all meant to represent the same thing: dark peach, night cavern, ocean, balloon. The most obvious interpretation is that the metaphor is meant to signify the female sexual organ. However, the metaphoric chain is distorted, phantasmagoric, and macabre. A stretch is required to allow the metaphoric chain to work, just as Graham stretches to convey what she wants to convey, which is equally brutal and surreal, and supports a consistent persona. The following poem, *Double*, first appeared in **Ocho #11**, and works an analogous angle:

Here is a box of fish marked tragedy.
Is it different from the dream

in which your alter ego kills the girl?
You are the same, and everyone knows it,

whether tracing the delicate lip of the oyster shell,
or sharpening your blade in the train car.

The marvelous glint is the same.
Though you think you sleep, you wake

and walk into the hospital, fingering
each instrument, opening each case with care.

The scales fall away with a scraping motion.
You are the surgeon and you are the girl.

University, where he was a University Fellow and taught for many years. He also taught at the University of the Sciences in West Philadelphia and lectured at Loyola University in Chicago. In 2021, the Acid Dropping EP, a collaboration with jazz and techno musicians, was released.

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Whether you lie like feathers on the pavement,
or coolly pocket your equipment, and walk away...

You are the same; and you are the same.
You only sleep to enter the luminous cave.

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that this poem places itself in an introspective realm of infantile sexuality. Yet that it is written from an adult perspective gives it a kind of double edge. If there is terror here, it is terror of the protagonist's own sexual power. The interest and pleasure for the reader is in trying to understand the different levels of self-evaluation that are going on, and how they affix to the narrator's sense of herself— how her persona, made tactile, is constructed. As in *A Pit*, there is a level of sexual solipsism inhering in the protagonist which becomes a maze, in and of itself. There is also a level on which the poem exteriorizes its own discomfort through the use of "gross" imagery: box(es) of fish, blades, surgeons. What is the nature of the operation? What necessitates it?

Reversing *A Pit*, the poem is given added depth because it is presented in the second person: not "I" but "you." It takes on the quality of a narrator talking to herself about herself, and makes the poem an exercise in imaginative self-consciousness, more so than *A Pit*. I find this admirable because it recuperates the tone of Confessional poetry, yet puts it through a new, more full-bodied, if brutish, kind of synesthetic light filter. What Graham sees as "Double" could be a split between her body and her mind, or between her sexuality and her intellect, or even between herself and another. Whatever it is, it has left her in pieces, and the poem seems to be an attempt, assuming textual entitlement, to reassemble herself. Both of these poems, and other Graham work, present a consistent persona, a tangent to Stacy Blair's: **a polymorphously perverse girl-woman lost in the never-land of her own body** (and polymorphously perverse can imply a body of thoughts and ideas in addition to the mere physical mechanism.) Though possibly mainstream-consonant, as has been duly noted, through usage of conventional narrative techniques, and exploration of familiar emotions, it would be difficult to get more edgy, in the parlance of this discourse, than that. Like painter **Jenny Kanzler**, Graham torques the Creatrix archetype in on itself, so that narratives of passion become narratives of purgation, yogic exercises to make metaphors.

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With **Stacy Blair**, a Midwestern poetess, there is more to see and say about the pertinent issues hewn into these texts— the creation of a new kind of female persona in American poetry; a new, more thoroughgoing approach to female sexuality and the female body; and a continuing,

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obsessive interest in the dark or shaded portion of both sexual and human reality. Stacy Blair's insignia piece is called *Photo Experiments*:

Blonde locks jut out over the tops of pigtails,
bleached beach/sand-color by the sun.
Time's short between this photograph and my regard.
Picture: no flower lays or shoes, just
young grass hips. She is, I am, we were,
very young. The entire page of this album
flanks history; under my mind, another
helpless time explosion. I was, we were, are,
naked newborn, as our little limbs on film.

What might strike the reader as most urgent thematically— the artful insinuation of pregnancy— is buttressed by the same strain of self-castigation, self-reproach, and self-mistrust we find in Graham. Like Graham, "young grass hips," "flanks," and "flower lays" are all heavy innuendo about carnality. What makes the poem so fascinating are the divisions and precisions Blair incises into her perceptions of identity— who she was, who she is now as two distinct selves; who she is and who her assumed lover is, also as two distinct selves; and the third entity they create together (possibly the unborn child) being distinct from them as another gestalt entity. It is difficult not to read "helpless time explosion" specifically as a reference to pregnancy— and equally gripping, because addressed, text-wise, with taut, terse authority. The phrase narrativizes, also, the attraction/repulsion dynamic at the heart of issues being explored, and/or processed through purgation. The body's helplessness redeems itself in the yogic tension-release incised into fulfilled textuality. Caesuras here create a sense of hypnosis for the reader, brief incantation become a formal edge. The poem ends in irresolution, purposefully— and the chiaroscuro edge (or edges) of what I called post-avant many years ago is very much in effect, on display. Why the Aughts created this sense of dread, of foreboding, along with the shadowy seductiveness of stark eroticism, is anyone's guess; a reaction, perhaps, to the stunted quality of the female body (and the female brain in response) in century XX art?

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For **Becky Hilliker**, narrativization opens a vista slightly more expansive than for Graham and Blair. Her insignia poem *Catch* takes the tropes of both the broadly sexual and the construction-of-persona from the sexual and makes significations resonate towards something, plumbed depths, more primordial, about essence and disappearance:

The wind turns the water into an animal
& the boat rides the back of swells,
bucking wetly.
My legs absorb the push & pull,

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thinking only of the fish,
sleek & dripping on the line,
neon green parachute ballooning
from its mouth.

I arch my back
& the rod dives.
The fish lifts, slimy as an egg,
spinning like a ballerina
on a silver thread,
its marble eye mute,
fixed on white.

How many times
did you find this world,
blinded, terrified?
There are hands on you
& pliers in your mouth,
metallic, blood-washed.
How many times have you waited
for the water
while everything lurches around you,
brilliant white, like the inside
of a hospital, like the underbelly
of a dream, gasping
to break the surface
toward that cold & sudden light?

Like Mary Walker Graham, the yogic affecting of catharsis through sexualization of metaphor and imagery is prominent. Phrases like "bucking wetly," "I arch my back," "the rod dives," all generate the impression that Graham is present as a companion and influence (both poetesses are affiliated with Boston). However, the final stanza finds Hilliker taking Creatrix energy to a sense of metaphoric identification, past the strictly sexual. Hilliker transubstantiates into a sense of becoming her own "Catch," and both the chain of similes and resolution that develop from this textually enact themselves in a fevered narrativization of original passion, passion being born. Death/birth, as a dynamic, is assayed as the poetess's seminal passion manifests from a vision of her own death-throes. The phenomenological non-constraint of no-boundaries register's Hilliker's consciousness a possessed one, as inside/outside tactile realities merge seamlessly in language hurled from the inside of one movement, one thrust, one ejaculation.

Indeed, the sense of textual crescendo built into *Catch* is admirable. It takes significations which for the reader could remain static and whirls them around into a dynamic context. Moreover, because the crescendo is

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built from the portion of the piece, past sexuality, into the idea of the original, the generative, and the ultimate similarity of birth and death (as yogic exercises involve generation and release of tensions from wellsprings of birth/death energies in the body), Hilliker employs sexualized imagery to dig deeper, into the phenomenology of origins, than Graham does. Hilliker is her own prey— which is to say, she registers herself, as a construct, originating from a double, a second form, of what could be taken as something homely she sees before her. That narrative of form built into *Catch* is about a textual reality more clipped, terse, staccato than Graham and Blair. The sense that the poem harnesses its resources towards a blinding sense of linguistic release at its conclusion, in a parallel structure with two similes ("like the inside/ of a hospital," "like the underbelly/of a dream"), makes it a more tense, herky-jerky, less steady ride than most of Mary Walker Graham's material. A matter of aesthetic preference, whether the measured quality of Graham's prosody or Hilliker's leaps and jolts generate pleasure, fascination. Even if it is dark-toned music.

On a general note: there is nothing new, necessarily, about narratives of form and passion. If the congeries of elements which make up that signification now deserve emphasis, around the idea of the Creatrix, it is because the Aughts saw the development, in the United States, of a number of female artists for whom form and passion were absolutely relevant. This, rather than a conceptual or theoretical bias, drawn from political or feminist ideologies, or assaying of cultural critiques. Neo-Romanticism, as I define it, and as is seen in Graham, Blair, and Hilliker, takes its roots in the consciousness of the individual. The development of individual and individualized concerns, perceptions, even neuroses, then constitutes the progress towards the enlightenment of engaged artistic expression. If this is all true, what the States has seen from post-modernity, multi-culturalism, and academic feminism, become inadequate to address the concerns of poets like Graham, Blair, and Hilliker. A new set of terms, and theoretical framework, is needed.

posted by adam fieled at 5:10 am

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